

**ON THE OLD TESTAMENT'S OR TaNaK'S  
SPIRITUALITY OF HUMAN EXISTENCE**

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## On the Old Testament's or TaNaK's Spirituality of Human Existence

*In Honor of Gene M. Tucker\**

Rolf P. Knierim, Institute for Antiquity and Christianity

### Introduction

At the end of this century, our generation is confronted with a situation which in one decisive respect is different from the

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\* I dedicate this paper to my colleague and friend Gene M. Tucker on the occasion of his retirement with my best wishes for a long and fulfilling future.

This paper is one of several versions on the subject of spirituality in the Old Testament or TaNaK. One version will appear in a book on *The Task of Old Testament Theology: Method and Cases*, forthcoming at Eerdmans. Another version will appear in the spring 1995 edition of the *Japanese Bulletin for Christianity and Culture*, translated by Professor Shozo Arai, Shoin's Women University, Kobe, Japan. It is based on a lecture given at universities in Tokyo, Kobe, and Niigata, Japan in May-June 1994. A third version, unpublished, represents a lecture given in Michigan at Calvin Seminary, Grand Rapids, and at the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Studies of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, on February 9 and 10, 1995. Also unpublished is a lecture of a version given before some church audiences.

situations of all generations before us. For the first time in human history, we are today and from our generation onward capable of doing something which was formerly impossible: We can destroy life on this planet. We may not yet be able to destroy the planet itself; but we certainly have the ability to destroy life - and most certainly all human life - as it has evolved throughout hundreds of millions of years. In the course of all human history, our generation represents the moment of transition from its first to its second epoch, the transition from the human inability to our ability to destroy life on this planet.

We all are familiar with the most important reasons for this situation. They are the technological potential for mass destruction and the fast approaching end of this planet's resources for sustaining the conditions for the life of the ever more exploding human population. This situation is the same for all of us, regardless of our different nationalities, cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, philosophies, or religions.

In the past, the earth guaranteed the sustenance of life for the human species. This secure basis was so much presupposed and taken for granted by all generations that it could not become a problem. It could even be ignored. From now on, we have to be aware that the earth no longer guarantees life for us unless we ourselves guarantee the life of the earth in the first place. And since the earth is fast reaching, or already has reached, its limit, the balance between the human species and the earth's limit will from now on move alongside the abyss. And because no earth and no God will any longer prevent the fall for us humans into the abyss, we will have to prevent it ourselves, all of us. This paradigm for human ethos is completely new; it supersedes all other ethical paradigms. It is the same for all human beings on this planet and nobody can ignore it without being utterly irresponsible.



Yet, while we all know about the current situation, nobody knows what will happen in the future, how the future can be secured and, especially disturbingly, whether or not the human species has the capability to avoid its own demise. This uncertainty not only about the future but especially about our ability to control the future implies, of course, the question as to whether or not the evolution of the human mind, the human brain and intellect, is capable of keeping in step with the pace of the destructive dynamics of human history, so as to prevent humanity from self-destruction.

It is, therefore, not accidental that concerned people all over the world and from all ways of life are today focusing on the conditions and the nature of the human mind. In the United States and elsewhere, this focus is particularly crystallized by the code word **spirituality**, although it is clear that the word has different meanings in different contexts.

Whether we use the English word **spirituality**, its French equivalent *spiritualité*, the German *Spiritualität*, the same word in any of the Romance languages, or different but analogous words from the languages of the Asian countries, we all are involved in an aspect of the discipline of anthropology that especially focuses on the understanding of the human mind. The study of the human mind is an essential, and thus far certainly the most evasive, part of the field of anthropology and related fields.

The attention to the spiritual nature of human existence pervades all societies around the globe. Its presuppositions, objectives, and rituals are as diverse as are the historical and cultural conditions of these societies or the different groupings within them. Although it is especially motivated by religious traditions, it is by no means the domain of the religious communities alone. It is found among all

humans and reflects what all humans have in common regardless of their varying specifically religious traditions.

The attention to spirituality across the different cultures does not offset or replace the contribution to it by the specific religious traditions, different and often divisive as they have been. These specific contributions to the spirituality of all humans complements the concerns shared by all just as much as they are themselves complemented by those concerns. Both, common experience shared by all and specific experiences by different communities, are mutually influential. This is also true for the subject of spirituality in general and specifically in the Old Testament or TaNaK. The aspects common to all are the property of the specific traditions, while those belonging to specific traditions offer their significance, however modified, to all - unless they isolate themselves from all.

Last but not least, the subject of spirituality is sometimes regarded as esoteric or even as belonging to a newly emerging field called esoterics. If one observes the hundreds of movements that propagate and market their solutions to the many kinds of human dilemmas, one cannot but wonder if many of them are not indeed peripheral if not esoteric in the specific sense of the word, i.e., not equally relevant for all. One of the true criteria for the spirituality of human existence has to demonstrate what is basic for all human beings and without which evidently no human being exists.

When focusing on the Old Testament's spirituality of human existence, I consider my topic as a contribution to what all are concerned about, a contribution to humanistic studies and to all efforts going on today in light of what I call the transition from the first to the second epoch of human history.

The Old Testament represents its own contribution to the subject of spirituality in, and to the spirituality of, all human cultures, philosophies, and religions at all times. Evidence for our subject in the Old Testament is everywhere, and I must confine myself to its essential aspects. An immediate problem is that the Old Testament contains neither a specific topical treatise of the subject nor even a word for our word **spirituality**. Just as with other subjects, however, it contains terminological signals and substantive aspects which form a prism in which we can recognize their correlation, and through which we can interpret its concept of human spirituality.

The primary signals belong to a cluster of words. Central in this cluster are the words **spirit**, **heart**, and **wisdom**. In the following, I want to speak about spirit and heart first, and then about wisdom.

### Spirit and Heart<sup>1</sup>

#### Spirit

1. The aspect of spirit is not the sole aspect for the understanding of spirituality, but it is essential, not so much because of its etymological relation to the word **spirituality** but because it points to the most elementary dimension of human spirituality. The main Hebrew word for 'spirit', *rûah*, and also the related word *něšāmâ*, or **breath**, belong to the language of meteorology which in turn belongs to the discipline of cosmology. The word *rûah* means moving, agitated air, or wind. With reference to living beings, especially the humans, it refers to the air in their breath as they breathe. Spirit as breath is a cosmic physical element, and as such an elementary part of the condition of living beings. By breathing, the living beings are inextricably linked to and dependent on the

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<sup>1</sup> The specific perspectives mentioned and referred to in this section belong to common knowledge in Old Testament scholarship. They are found in H. W. Wolff's *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), and similar publications. Their connection and the direction of the total argument are my own.

life of the cosmos. It is that element through which the human *physis*, the body, becomes vitalized. It gives life, or vitality, to the human *physis*; it is its spiriting element. It is the gasoline for the engine of the body. Without this spiriting breathed air, the *physis* is dead.

Body and spirit belong together as the two elementary parts which the human condition shares with all living beings. These parts are not identical. Whereas the body is dead or dies without breathing, the breathing of air without a body makes nobody alive.

The human breathing of air which causes the body to become and be alive is not the effect of human initiative. Rather, it is the effect of an initiative outside humanity which triggers and sustains this breathing. The Old Testament says that this initiative comes from the giver of life, the deity. Not unlike a doctor who slaps a newborn baby in order to shock it into breathing and, hence, into life, so did God breathe into Adam's nostrils "the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Gen 2:7). Ps 104:29-30 complements Gen 2:7 by saying this about all living beings:

When you take away their breath [rûah], they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit [also rûah], they are created; . . . .

These and other passages do not mean that the breath of life is a divine substance or the spirit of the deity in the humans. It only means that the cosmic air is, so to say, pumped by the deity into humans, and that the human life does not start and sustain this pumping, but is started and sustained by it.

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Through this in-breathing of the breath of life into the body through the **nostrils** - the Old Testament also knows about mouth



to mouth resuscitation (2 Kgs 4:34) - the humans become **living souls**, or living beings (Gen 2:7). Meaning: The humans do not *have* souls, they *are* living souls. We, influenced by a different anthropology, said that the human condition consists of body and soul. The Old Testament says that the living human soul consists of the body from the ground of the earth and the breath of life from the cosmic air. We said that the humans are not really alive without a soul. The Old Testament says that the living human soul is dead without being connected with the cosmic air through breathing.

This picture, attested in many passages, shows that the Old Testament is clearly aware of the absolute dependence of human life on the **spirit of life** in the cosmological-meteorological sense of the term, the breath of life provided for rather than created by the humans. This understanding means that the humans are spiritual beings because they are first of all living beings. They are spiritual in being alive. The condition of life is at the outset, and before all other conditions of spirituality, a condition of spiritual existence. Life as such is a spiritual condition. Without this condition, no other condition of spirituality is possible. The spirituality of life as life is basically characterized as life vis-à-vis and above death.

This aspect is fundamental for the Old Testament's understanding of the spirituality of human existence. It becomes immediately important as a guard against a quick confinement of **spiritual** existence to specific and possibly exclusivist religious perspectives. Spiritual existence is not only, not even primarily, an internal experience. It is the experience of life as life. Life in its totality above death is more than something inferior when compared to claimed higher forms of internalized spirituality. It is the basic spiritual reality, a miracle to be marveled at as that which is

elevated out of dust and above the radicality of its opposite—death. Eccl 9:4-5 says it thus:

Whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; and they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost.

2. In the Old Testament, life as God-given spirituality is a basic category of human experience. Nevertheless, the Old Testament distinguishes between the God-given breath of life and the deity's own spirit. Many passages speak about the eruptions of the spirit of God through charismatic groups or persons: "The spirit of the LORD took possession of Gideon; and he sounded the trumpet, . . ." (Judg 6:34). Other texts speak about the continual indwelling of the divine spirit in special persons, which results in the enlightenment of their mind and triggers their words and actions:

The spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward (1 Sam 16:13).

But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin (Mic 3:8).

The spirit of the LORD GOD is upon me, . . . to bring good news to the oppressed; . . . (Isa 61:1).

The prophet is known as "the man of the spirit" (Hos 9:7). And the psalmist prays, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Ps 51:10).

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In these and many other texts, the spirit of the deity is perceived as the specific element in the breath of life which enables the humans to fulfill the divine intentions for the world and their own lives. This element endows them with wisdom, counsel, and understanding for the sake of justice, liberation, peace, help for the afflicted, and for everything that is good.

The Old Testament has a very important reason for its focus on the deity's own spirit specifically at work in the elementary human spirituality. The elementary human spirituality can become subject to the autonomy of human self-interest, of interests that become disconnected from and turn against the goodness of life. The spirit of the good life can be perverted to a spirit of evil. It is not automatically protected by the spirit of life alone. Rather, it is in need of protection by the influence of those criteria by which the goodness of life is preserved. It is in need of guidance. This guidance for the spirituality of the humans is called the spirit of God.

Why can the spirit of life fall prey to autonomous human self-interest? Because it is channeled through the human mind. The human mind is perceived as the central relay station through which the breath of life becomes actualized in thoughts, words, and actions, and through which the divine spirit itself is channeled. It is the human mind in which the spirit of the deity and the autonomous human spirit meet and struggle for the control over human spirituality. In the Old Testament, the human mind is basically called *lēb* or *lēbāb*, **heart**.

### **Heart**

1. The Old Testament considers - incorrectly - the heart, the pump in our chest, as the central psycho-somatic organ, the organ which

we identify as the brain and central nerve system. Apart from this anatomical misconception, the Old Testament is supremely aware that the senses, embodied in a part of the human anatomy, represent the center of the human personality. For this conceptual awareness, it uses the word **heart** as the most important in a cluster of words. The significance of this awareness is attested by the fact that statistically, the word occurs some 850 times, of which some 280 references, or one third of all, are found in the anthropologically important Books of the Psalms, the Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.

The heart is the place of the mind. King Solomon prays, "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind" (1 Kgs 3:9). It is the place of sensitivity and emotion: It is like wax and melts within the breast (Ps 22:14); it is troubled (25:17), in anguish (55:4), embittered (73:21), and appalled (143:4); it throbs (38:10), is in tumult (38:8), becomes hot (39:3), and so on. It is the place of longing and desire: "You have given him his heart's desire" (21:2). It is also the place of intellect and rationality: "The heart [NRSV "mind"] of the wise makes their speech judicious, and adds persuasiveness to their lips" (Prov 16:23). And it is the place of conscience: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me;" and "Teach me wisdom in my secret heart" (Ps 51:10, 6).

Just as with the case of the spirit of breath in the human body, with the heart there is no dichotomy between the physical and the psychic. Both coincide in it, in that the psychic side unfolds through its somatic side, or not at all. The mind unfolding through the brain is the central agent for governing living human beings by plans, discernment, logic, judgment, emotions, and ambitions. It is the spiritual center of personhood, and the relay station through which human beings are actualized as persons. It is the same endowment for all human persons.

2. But again, just as in the case of the possible discrepancy between the goodness of the spirit of life and its perversion in the living human beings, the same kind of discrepancy can also exist between the good and the evil directions of the minds in the brains of human persons, where the need for a clean heart conflicts with the foolishness of the fools. It is very clear that it is not the somatic side but the mind itself, the *psyche* of the brain, that is evil.

The *psycho-somatic* unity can disintegrate for two reasons: because of the illness of the body or because of the illness of the mind. The illness of the mind is much more serious, not only because it also affects the body but especially because it reveals that the mind, unlike the generally healthy body, is, while not unhealthy as such, essentially susceptible to very diverse influences and their competition and even conflict. Emotions and rational thought can be at odds: "Fools show their anger at once, but the prudent ignore an insult" (Prov 12:16). The mind is influenced by good or evil thoughts, by wisdom or foolishness. Its plans can be futile (Prov 16:1); it can be stubborn (Exod 8:15), or of stone (Ezek 36:26). The mind, spiritual as it is, and with it the spirituality of the human brain, is volatile, in itself not secure and not certain of itself, and unreliable. It is in need of help and guidance.

In sum: The Old Testament says that neither sort of spirituality, be it of the spirit of life as life or of the spirit of the mind as personhood, provides as such a sufficient protection from foolishness, faults, perversion, and destructiveness. Each sort is in need of guidance, direction, and support. Human spirituality of any kind is neither good nor bad because it exists, be that fact based cosmologically or psychologically. All humans are spiritualized as living beings and mentalized as persons. Whether or not their spirituality serves good or evil, wisdom or foolishness, depends on those criteria by which the difference between good and evil,



wisdom and foolishness can be discerned. We have to turn to the Old Testament's understanding of wisdom.

### Wisdom

The Old Testament knows that the humans are distinguished from all other spirited living beings, the plants and animals, by the mental capacity of the human mind. This capacity enables them to be conscious of their environment and themselves, to feel, hope, despair, remember, plan, think, and make decisions. It represents the activities of the human *psyche* and their spirituality. It can be studied in the Old Testament's psychological knowledge.

A. The knowledge of the human *psyche* pervades the Old Testament literature, and it is profound. From among many aspects, two are particularly important for my subject: the aspect of feelings and the aspect of reason. I am speaking about the difference between emotionality and rationality.

That the ancient Israelites were temperamental is obvious. Their hymns reflect exuberant happiness over good experiences. Their laments express the disconsolate mood in the face of death and catastrophe. These and other outbreaks of temperament are not only real - they also ring true because they correspond to true human conditions.

But listen to this:

One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled [is better] than one who captures a city (Prov 16:32).

A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back (29:11).

Desire without knowledge is not good, and one who moves too hurriedly misses the way (19:2).

These and many similar passages point out that when emotions become uncontrolled, or autonomous, they become unreasonable. In such moments, persons are irrational, not controlled by evidence, circumspection, and coherent thought. Excitement, either by anger or exuberance, may or may not be reasonable and indicative of truth. The explosions of temperament do not prove whether we are correct or true in what we say and do.

In 1 Samuel 25, the story of Nabal, David, and Abigail, two hot-heads explode against each other. Nabal insults David and David threatens to kill Nabal. The situation is dangerous. The only person who remains reasonable between the mean Nabal and the irascible David is a woman, Nabal's wife, Abigail. Knowing that her husband is a fool, she leaves him aside and instead goes to David with the food for his men which he had requested. Nabal does not know what happens, David is pacified, and Abigail becomes one of David's wives. Reason over emotion, including a new relationship!

Emotionality and rationality also affect human decisions. Cain is envious of his brother, Abel. He is warned to control the evil intent of his mind. He may have reason to be envious, but he has no reason to kill his brother. Abel was not responsible for the deity's preference for his sacrifice over Cain's. Cain might have tried to kill the deity. But despite the warning, he kills his brother, a totally unreasonable criminal act.

The sons of Jacob envy their brother Joseph because of their father's preference for Joseph and Joseph's own arrogance. Out of that raging envy, they deliberately decide first to kill Joseph and then settle on selling him into slavery. And this they do. This severest of criminal acts born out of emotion is very unreasonable because it is very disproportionate to the slight done to them.

Very clearly, the Old Testament's psychology not only distinguishes between emotionality and rationality, it also considers empirical, rational, logical, and coherent thought as the criterion for the truth or untruth, or the wisdom or foolishness, of emotionality. In its spirituality of the human mentality, the aspect of rationality plays a decisive role. We must turn to rationality as wisdom.

**B.** In the religious history of Western civilization, rationality and intellectuality have often been met with suspicion if not with rejection. They are understood as destroying faith, whereby faith is assumed to consist of mystical, supra - if not anti-rational intuition, or to result from supra-natural revelation which is not empirically verifiable. At best they are believed to belong to an inferior spirituality; at worst they are considered as the enemy of true spirituality.

This rejection of the religious validity of rationality and intellectuality is badly mistaken. To be sure, it is influenced by a false understanding of the criticism of rationality in both Testaments of the Christian Bible. It is true that the wisdom and knowledge of the wicked leads astray (Isa 47:10) and that the wise, too, are not to boast in their wisdom (Jer 9:23). Paul says in 1 Cor 1:20 that God has "made foolish the wisdom of the world." The entire Bible knows that not only human emotions but also human wisdom, intellectuality, rationality, thought, and science can be foolish. But when the latter is the case, it is because their

assumptions and arguments are insufficient and not because they are intellectual, rational, knowledgeable, or scientific. Knowledge and wisdom are not stupid because they are only passing knowledge or wisdom with which eternal religious spirituality would have nothing to do.

Against the misconception of rationality, it must be said that there is no religious spirituality which is not based on what can be experienced, known, and rationally stated and explained. Even when we state what we do not or cannot know, we can and should explain why this is so. When Paul speaks about the wisdom of God (1 Cor 2:7), he does not propagate irrationality. He knows what he is talking about and explains this knowledge for everyone's understanding through the intensely intellectual and rational arguments in his letters.

The same is true for the entire Old Testament literature. The writers of this literature, of its historical works, its legal corpora, its prophetic books, of the Psalms and Proverbs, were eminently educated people. They belonged to the academic elite of their time. Their works reflect not only immense amounts of knowledge and erudition, e.g., from many fields of scientific knowledge internationally available in the ancient Near East, they also reflect the results of their own intensive thinking, of coherent, logical systematization and rational understanding.<sup>2</sup> And their works reflect these characteristics because of, not despite, their religiosity. They reflect the intelligence of their religious spirituality. Because of this spirituality, they were true humanists. The Old Testament does not advocate ignorance and the neglect of constant, serious study of anything.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. my paper on "Science in the Bible" in *Word and World* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 242-55; also in my *The Task of Old Testament Theology: Method and Cases*, (Eerdmans, forthcoming).

The aspect of the Old Testament's spirituality concerning the existence of all humans, of the interdependence of spirit, mind, and wisdom and of their critically complementary function in this spirituality, is nowhere as intensively at work as in the so-called wisdom literature. Of course, this aspect was incorporated into the tradition of ancient Israel's Yahwism, with the focus on reverence for God Yahweh. The focus is programmatically expressed in the Book of Proverbs (1:2-7), but also throughout this entire literature.

The insights arrived at in this literature belong to common human experience. Rather than resulting from ancient Israel's experience of its specific history with Yahweh, they represent general human knowledge also affirmed by Yahwism. However, when connecting this knowledge with the personal ethos of reverence for Yahweh, just as when connecting the reverence for Yahweh with general human knowledge, this kind of wisdom spirituality points to more than the juxtaposition of two kinds of knowledge, generally human and specifically Israelite, in Israel's Yahwism. It points to the intrinsic connectedness of knowledge as knowledge - also intellectually - with personal ethos in such a way that the personal ethos - culminating in its highest criterion, the fear of Yahweh - endlessly intensified the search for discerning knowledge just as much as empirical human knowledge provided the insight for the ethos.

The Book of Proverbs alone contains almost nine hundred proverbs, concisely and poetically formulated, each of which expresses a particular insight. These expressions are the result of intensive thinking about observations which can just as much be derived from full-blown stories as they can be unfolded into stories. The Book of Ecclesiastes, too, is a collection of several hundred more such insights. And the Book of Job must not be forgotten either. In the following, I am focusing on several major aspects



which show how the spirituality of the human mind works in these proverbs as wisdom.

1. The first and basic aspect is that all proverbs rest on empirical observation. The sage in Ecclesiastes frequently says, "I saw:"

I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with (3:10).

I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well (3:16).

Again, I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun (4:1; cf. 4:4, 7; 8:10; 9:11, 13.).

The common fact stated by this sage is true for all sages: They see. We encounter people who go through life with looking eyes and seeing minds.

At the outset, the sages state facts which are encountered. To be sure, rather than referring from proverb to proverb to an individual experience in isolation from others they refer to types of experiences that are of the same kind. Already these expressions of typologized observation represent an empirical understanding of facts in which occurrences are systematized according to the same kinds after they were experienced in isolation from each other. While presupposing the encounter of isolated events, they constructively identify the systems according to their kinds, not in abstraction from the events or in terms of abstract ideas, but in terms of their own typical reality. This constructive identification happens through the activity of the human mind because the

isolated occurrences do not typologize themselves. The proverbs express what the mind "sees" based on what the eye looks at.

Yet, more is going on in the constantly alert mind of these proverbs. From their encounters with hundreds of occurrences, the sages not only know that life consists of the endless number of incidents - also in isolation - and of their different types. They also know that their experiences often concur and often conflict, and especially that they are qualitatively different. The typological difference of experiences does not mean that all are of the same quality or value. And the discernment of different, especially opposing qualities, is also the result of the activity of the human mind: not because the human mind itself qualifies these differences on the basis of abstract, e.g., moral, principles, but because it identifies their morality inherent in the reality of the occurrences themselves. This also belongs to what is "seen."

Thus whereas good people are rewarded with a good life and evil people perish, it is also true that "there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evil-doing" (Eccl 7:15).

While the constructive and destructive thoughts, words, and actions are clearly distinguishable, their consequences sometimes correspond to these actions but often do not. The facts of life, typical as they are, show no consistent pattern. There is in part a difference between good and evil people and in part no difference.

This observation is unsettling. It amounts to the experience of an incoherent world in which there is ultimately no basis for distinguishing between good and evil, justice and injustice. It might mean that in one's life, one should not bother about what is right and wrong, or better or worse. Should that be so, the human

mind need not worry about wisdom - the opposite of foolishness - because the essential purpose of wisdom, to find out what is good in and for life, would be pointless. If in essence, nothing makes a difference, why should one try to see differences, different values, and respect them as guidelines for one's life? Why should one not just become nihilistic?

In this observation, the wisdom oriented spirituality of the human mind confronts its own deepest problem. It is the problem of whether any activity of the human mind lends itself to being a basis for human ethos and morale, or whether this activity is ultimately demoralizing. And more than this, it is the problem of whether the main purpose of the human mind, to discern wisdom, and with it the functioning of the human mind itself, make any sense at all. This crucial problem is, besides many other texts, crystallized in the Book of Job, and most sharply addressed in the Book of Ecclesiastes. When combining his multiple observations of real life, of its similar, diverse, and contrary situations and courses, the sage behind Ecclesiastes summarizes: "All is vanity" (1:2). I interpret this to mean: All is relative. Nothing is absolute. If one considers any one thing as absolute, this is done in vain. The question arises about the difference between relativity and irrelevance.

Does "vanity" mean that the multiple and diverse experiences amount to nothing, and that all of them are equally valuable or invaluable? Does it mean that there are no differences at all between what is good and evil, true or untrue, just or unjust, better or worse? Obviously not! If one studies how the sage's mind itself operates in Ecclesiastes, one can see how his absolute sounding statement, "All is vanity," is relativized in the same course of thought in which it is made. One has said that this Book represents

the crisis of wisdom. I prefer to say that it represents the ultimate or radical challenge to wisdom.

2. In the following, I want to point to four aspects in which the human mind challenges itself to its limits in Ecclesiastes.

a. First, our sage says that the fates of the good and evil persons are not always the outcome consistent with their thoughts, words, and actions. Yet, he never says that there is no difference between the good and the bad, the righteous and the wicked, or the wise and the foolish. Regardless of the outcome of their actions, the difference between righteous and wicked behavior is a fact of life and cannot be ignored. Its recognition is not vanity. It therefore does make a difference whether one does what is good or better, or bad or worse. If one ignores this difference, one loses touch with reality itself, and that would be vanity indeed. And our sage knows it. Whether one does what is good in order to be rewarded or because it is good regardless of reward, our sage knows that the difference between the righteous and the wicked, as well as the wise and the foolish, depends on what is right or wrong, and not on the consequences of right or wrong causes.

b. Second, in chapter three, our sage says that there is a season for everything, that different situations and experiences have their own, limited times, and that none lasts forever. Thus, there is:

a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time

to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace (3:2-8).

All this is correctly observed, but in each pair of two opposed seasons, one season is either good or preferable, whereas the other is either bad or at least less than preferable. The time to die is an evil time, as opposed to the good time of birth. To heal is good, to kill is bad; the same is true for the difference between love and hate, war and peace, and so on. Everything has its season, but not everything is equally good or bad. Every human being knows this, and so does our sage. All is vanity, but not all is equally vain, if it is vain at all.

c. Thirdly, in chapter nine, he again says that

the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. This is an evil . . . (vv. 2-3a).

Of course, each time, there is the difference between the good and the bad persons. But what is the evil in the same fate of all? They all, without difference, must die. But does the same fate of death for all mean that their opposite characteristics just stated are irrelevant while they are alive? Our sage himself answers by saying:

But whoever is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. Their love and their hate and



their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun (vv. 4-6).

Just when our sage says that all is vanity, and that nothing makes a difference in view of **death**, he asserts that precisely because of the fate of death, the fact of life makes all the difference, including the differences within life.

d. Fourthly, when in vv. 7-10 of the same text, he speaks about specific differences in life, he points to basic values of life in a revealing way that is not even generally recognized. He gives four pieces of advice, and that in the following order:

1) Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do (v. 7).

2) Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head (v. 8).

3) Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun (v. 9).

4) Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going (v.10).

These instructions follow each other in a programmatic sequence. Food comes first. One may survive naked, without a spouse or work, but not without daily food. Then comes clothing and hygiene (focusing on luxury, to be sure, but not without the

implied presupposition of the need for the clothing and hygiene of all), also daily and from infancy on, before one has a spouse and works. Then comes the relationship of the sexes as one between husband and wife. The reason why this aspect is mentioned before the aspect of work can be detected when one looks at the creation stories in which the relationship of the sexes comes before the humans' work. The relationship of male and female belongs to the order of creation, whereas human work belongs to the structure of human history and its culture.

To this, our sage says: Enjoy it! Even your work, whether you like its toil or not, do it with your might, your energy. And, God is in it. Truly, nothing of all this is vanity.

The sequence of these four instructions is arranged according to the order of human reality. Most important, however, is that all four belong together because their aspects reflect the fundamental needs of human existence. The choice of these four aspects has nothing to do with our sage's subjective preferences, his personal idiosyncrasies, or a hedonistic view of life. On the contrary, it reflects what is commonly known and affirmed as those values of human life that are absolutely fundamental. In other words: Our author resorts to the foundation of human existence in the theology of creation out of which culture and history also evolve. This foundation involves the hierarchy of the elementary material needs - including some of their luxurious elements such as wine and oil, to be sure - but it has nothing to do with a materialistic view of life. Each of these essentials is necessary for life, the life of all humans, even as life is more than each and even all four of them.

What we can see in this operation of the human mind is the intensive attempt at discerning what is fundamentally valuable in human life, not relative or irrelevant, in the face of its mortality.

This pursuit leads to the comparison of realistic observations. This comparison shows first of all how important life, the breath of life, is in the face of death. Furthermore, it shows what in life is essential in relation to other things that are less essential or irrelevant. All is relative in the face of death. Nothing is absolute, not even death when considered in light of the value of life.

C. Is our sage an atheist? By no means. Thirty-eight times he speaks about God (Eccl 1:13; 2:26a+b; 3:10, 11, 13, 14a+b, 15, 17, 18; 5:1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 18, 19a+b, 20; 6:2a+b; 7:13, 14, 18, 26, 29; 8:12, 13, 15, 17; 9:1, 7; 11:5, 9; 12:7, 13, 14). This radical realist is just as much aware of God as is the rest of the Old Testament. This awareness of God is of a particular nature. One has said that for our sage God is hidden, not visibly present as in, e.g., spectacular theophanies or all sorts of revelation. However, the hiddenness of God does not mean that God is absent from everything that happens in this world and that the humans should not conduct their lives in the constant awareness of the presence of God.

The human mind is aware of the hidden presence of God. In this awareness, the operation of the human mind, in its search for discerning wisdom, fulfills the most profound function in the spirituality of humans. By knowing that God is present in everything that happens and in everything that humans do, they know that everything is relevant and nothing irrelevant, that nothing is vanity. By knowing also that God's presence is hidden, as in the inscrutability of the outcome of human actions in their mortal fate, they know that no wisdom is absolute or ultimate but also that their thoughts, words, and actions are decisive because God is present in these actions regardless of their outcome. The actions have their value in themselves, not in their desired rewards. This is the wisdom of the penultimate. It is never the last. And the condition of the human mind must be such that the

mind is always open for every situation in this world and for what is new and better.

The wisdom of the ultimacy of God's presence says that all human wisdom is for that very reason penultimate and, in the context of the thousand-fold human experience, must be constantly reviewed, revised, updated, or the human mind loses contact with reality - which would be the end of wisdom.

Not incidentally, the Book of Ecclesiastes concludes:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of every one (12:13).

And, as for the inscrutable things:

God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil (12:14).

According to the Old Testament, human spirituality and its rationality are crystallized in the reverence for the hidden presence of God in this world. This spirituality is adopted in its most personalized form of experience in the prayer of a psalmist who says:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot

attain it. Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them - they are more than the sand; when I come to the end - I am still with you (Ps 139:1-18).

The spirituality of this psalmist's mind - certainly up to this point in his prayer - is a wisdom which is totally guided by the awareness of the totality of the world in both its most universal and personal dimensions, and by the equal awareness of the hidden presence of God in this totality. It is a wisdom spirituality in which such a person, through the experience of this world always, is everywhere and inescapably confronted by the question of the truth of her or his own existence.



## Conclusion

In an essay on the future of international conflicts, written with respect to the changes of the structures of history, an aspect especially called for by the impending date of the millennial transition, Francis Fukuyama, the author of the book *The End of History and the Last Man*,<sup>3</sup> arrives at the conclusion that these conflicts will basically be economic in nature. They will therefore result in a redistribution of power around the globe, power not defined by the political models of the past (to which one must add that in no past was a political model, or a war based on it, possible apart from the economic potentials of the warring parties) but by culture, i.e., the stratification of human capital (*Humankapital*). Human capital (emphases added) will determine the effects of labor, and the societies that will have the advantage will be those that most effectively succeed in utilizing this capital.

In this conclusion, which is particularly pertinent to our subject, Fukuyama wrote:

It is an irony of development that international competition will in the future revolve around the nature of domestic society. And the pivotal question, especially for the countries out in front, will be: Who will be able to generate, utilize, and maintain human capital most efficiently? In this competition, which may be called the sublimation of war or also the spiritualization of the economy, the referential aspects will be totally different from everything which in the past we have called war" [Emphasis added].<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> (New York: Avon Books, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> "Die Zukunft des Krieges," *Magazin of the German Frankfurter Allgemeine* 16, no. 50 (December 1994): 16-23 especially 23. The German essay appeared in translation from the American, the text of which is unavailable to me. I assume that Fukuyama wrote the essay originally for the above mentioned magazin. Its quoted part represents my own retranslating

Fukuyama calls for the spiritualization of the economy, for referential aspects totally different from everything which - I modify - in the past were the priorities of human societies, and for the mobilization of human capital. This call has much to do with what I have called in this paper the spirituality of human existence, that kind of spirituality that is concerned with the elementary factors of all - especially all human - life on this planet vis-à-vis death.

Devastating earthquakes or similar natural catastrophes, or any war and genocide are not the only kinds of events by which human lives are indiscriminately cut short. But they bring into sharp focus the elementary factors on which the survival of everybody in catastrophic conditions daily depends and without which nobody can exist. As in the case of an earthquake, a reporter standing in the rubble of Kobe, Japan, a day or two after its January 17, 1995 earthquake put it concisely: "What these people now need is food, clothing and shelter. Nothing else matters." And they worked hard to search for survivors, their own and others. Our reporter may have quoted Ecclesiastes 12, not without radicalizing it.

When reading the Bible, of either Testament, the aspects of the spirituality of human existence in it become critically important for the evaluation of other biblical concepts such as history, which is impossible without human existence, which itself is imbedded in creation; and others, such as especially universality, monotheism and eschatology.

The claims to universality may be a tool for one group's domination of all others or, by contrast, a principle of one's own

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into English. The German expression *Humankapital* refers to the economic value of the human potential itself, especially of the human mind.

subordination to the priorities including all equally. Universality can be as bad as it can be good. It is as such no proof of truth.

The same is true for monotheism. In the name of monotheism, just as in the name of polytheism, people's lives have just as much been destroyed as sustained. As for eschatology, certainly its cosmologically unrealistic utopia, it is subject to the conditions of human existence in ongoing human history as long as human history lasts.

In light of the value-conflicts in each of these and other concepts, attention to that kind of spirituality that recognizes the same conditions for the existence of all humans - for each and all generations, also in the records of the Bible - becomes after all indispensable for all. This attention requires that the human mind itself be guided by such a spirituality that is connected with and responsive to the fundamental conditions of all human life above death.

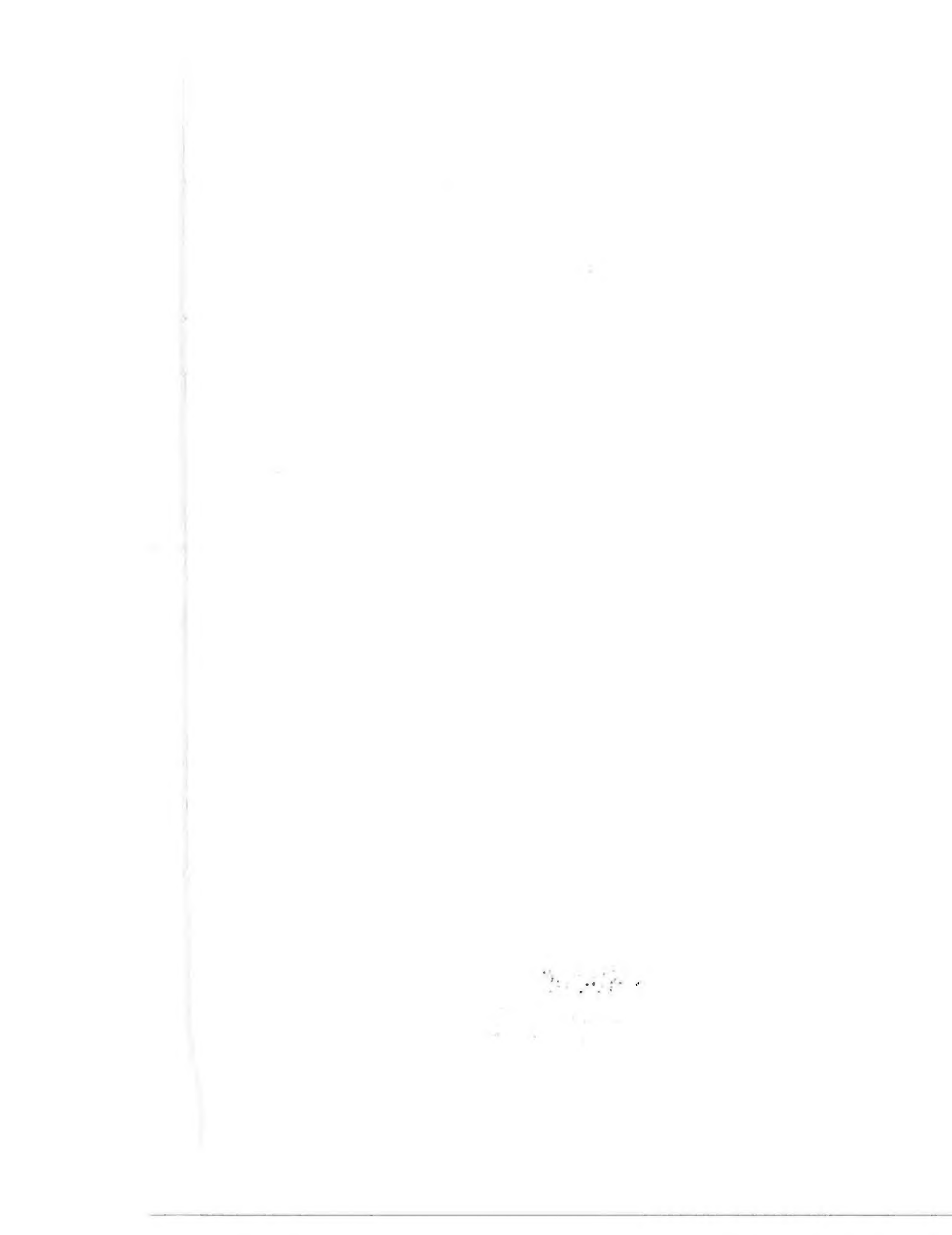
I have said that we do not know whether or not the human brain has the capacity to keep pace with the ever more accelerating human history. This uncertainty implies neither pessimism nor optimism. It is realistic. It only means that we need a spirituality of the human mind which strives for the better wisdom in our life with this planet, the only one to which we are bound, in the relations of our nations and cultures, and in our personal lives.

Just as we know that no state of wisdom is ultimate, we must also know that a state of no wisdom, a spirituality of foolishness, is potentially if not actually suicidal. The fact that the survival of the human race can ultimately not be guaranteed by any wisdom, makes our search for the better wisdom all the more urgent. In the

ultimate uncertainty, the search for the better wisdom still leaves us with hope. And hope is the portion of the living.

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